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U.S.-Vietminh Operation Declassified

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New light was shed yesterday on one of the most obscure and ironic chapters of America's involvement in Vietnam—the close collaboration between U.S. military intelligence officers and Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam guerrillas during the closing days of World War II.

Intelligence documents describing training and joint military operations of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services "Deer Mission" with Ho's forces in July, August and September, 1945, were made public yesterday by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee

after being declassified by the government.

The daring mission of the OSS team, which was parachuted into the North Vietnamese jungle with instructions to link up with Ho's forces, was to interdict Japanese lines of communication and work with guerrilla forces in the vicinity of Hanoi.

Although it is no secret that U.S. intelligence operatives worked with Ho's forces against the Japanese, details and documents from the mission have never previously been made public.

The documents reveal an attitude of strong sympathy on the part of the Americans toward Ho and his Vietminh movement. They describe Ho's intensely expressed hopes that his American allies would help stave off French colonial re-occupation of Vietnam.

In one of its first reports after linking up with the Vietminh, the Deer Mission's commander, Maj. Allison K. Thomas, advised his superiors: "Forget the Communist Bogy [sic]. VML (the Vietminh League) is not Communist. Stands for freedom and reforms from French harshness . . . If French go part way with them, they might work with French . . ."

And in a later evaluation, an unsigned report to OSS headquarters described Ho as "a brilliant and capable man, completely sincere in his opinions. I have travelled throughout Tonkin Province (a reference to North Vietnam) and found that in that area people of all classes are imbued with the same spirit and determination as their leader."

The first contacts between the Deer Mission and the Vietminh, in mid-July, 1945, was described in a message from Major Thomas after the team parachuted into Kumlung, near Ho's jungle hide-out.

The Americans, Thomas reported, were "escorted to Mr. Hoe [sic], one of the big leaders of the VML (Viet Minh

League) Party. He speaks excellent English but is very weak physically as he recently walked in from Tsingsi.

"He received us most cordially . . . We then had supper consisting of beer (recently captured), rice, bamboo sprouts, and barbecued steak. They freshly slaughtered a cow in our honor."

Ho took exception to the presence of a French officer on the team. "He will welcome 10 million Americans, however," according to Thomas' report.

At that point the Americans began their training program for the Vietminh units, and relations between Ho Chi Minh and the American OSS operatives grew increasingly cordial.

In a later dispatch to OSS headquarters, after completion of the mission, Major Thomas said Ho was also identified as C. M. Hoo. "Hoo was his code name. Later, when he became president of the Provisional Government of Vietnam [sic] . . . at Hanoi, he divulged his real name which is Ho Chi Minh."

During the first week of August, 1945, Thomas reported, "Mr. Hoo began rounding up 200 soldiers for us out of which we were to pick the best 100." Formal American training of the Vietminh guerrillas began on Aug. 9 on a rigorous schedule from 5:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. each day.

A later entry in the Thomas file reported that the American supervised training was "continuing at high speed in carbines, M-1's, tommyguns, bazookas, LMG's (light machine guns), Brens, mortars and grenades."

Speaking of the Vietminh units under his team's tutelage, Major Thomas said, "the boys picked it up fast, had been eager to learn and made up for it in spirit what they still lacked in training."

Hearing of the impending Japanese surrender, the Vietminh troops, with their American advisers, set out to attack the Japanese-held town of Thainguyen "to show the Japs how strong they were," as Thomas recounted it. After a four-day battle against the well fortified Japanese troops, the Vietminh took the town.

Afterward there were pa-

rades and celebrations, Thomas reported. "The Vietminh did everything to make our stay as pleasant as possible for us. They gave us their best food and we seldom went without a chicken or a duck or meat of some kind to go along with our rice . . . At every village we entered on our various trips the whole population would turn to welcome us and present to us the 'key to the village' as it were . . . The scenes were invariably impressive and 'touching' to all the Americans as we knew they were expressing what was in their hearts and offering to us the best gifts they had."

In the period following the Japanese surrender Ho sought to establish the authority of his government throughout Vietnam. He was also seeking to negotiate with the French for independence.

Under the chaotic circumstances of the moment, authority was being exercised in various parts of Vietnam by the British, the French, Chinese army units and the Vietminh.

American policy was beginning to veer from an attitude of wartime sympathy for Ho and his cause toward full military support of the French. The admonitions of the OSS intelligence teams that the Vietminh was primarily a nationalistic movement went unheeded.

Major Thomas on Sept. 17, 1945, sent this message to OSS headquarters in Washington:

"Our friend of the forest, Mr. C. M. Hoo, now Mr. Ho Chi Minh, was president of the Provisional Government and minister of foreign affairs. Another friend of the forest, Mr. Van, now Vo Nguyen Giap, became Minister of Interior . . ."

"The new government appears to be enthusiastically supported by the majority of the population in every province of Indochina. The new government was given strength by the resignation and abdication of Bao Dai, former puppet Emperor. . . The people know the French intend to come back but they keep saying if they come back with arms they will fight to the death."

In a later summary cable, Major Thomas reported that the Vietminh had "nothing but praise and kindness for the Americans and to send

students there and invite American technicians here as its desire. The party has helped in returning several American pilots and Mr. C. M. Hoo had a personal conference with General Chennault at Kunming on the subject."

That was on the eve of the first Indochinese war. The French did come back and waged an unsuccessful eight-year military campaign to defeat the Vietminh forces, which grew from the 3,000-man force commanded by Ho in the jungles.

As for the Americans and the subsequent course toward full-scale military involvement against the Vietnamese Communists, the Deer Mission stands out as a historical aberration about which little has been known publicly.